

Gargle the Gruesome

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Summary: Astrid and the Bog Burglars have a plan to finally defeat the Red Death, only it requires the help of a mysterious hero named Gargle the Gruesome. Gargle agrees to help, but he lays a horrible price at Astrid's feet: her hand in marriage.

1. The Spawn of Lightning and Death

_Thanks to HaiJu for reading this over for me. :) She rocks!

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><p>Gargle the Gruesome

>A How to Train Your Dragon Fanfic by Cori<p>

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><p>The Spawn of Lightning and Death<p>

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><p>Astrid Hofferson crossed her arms, axe gleaming in the moonlight, and glared at anyone who came even a toe too close to her. She had spent the better part of her eighteen years dreaming about what it would be like to be a Shield Maiden. To pillage and plunder and slay and kill her enemies. She'd hung on the words of the elder warriors as they recounted the tales from their lives. She could retell most of the ancient stories about the heroes of the past.

What nobody had told her, however, was how exceedingly boring life was the vast majority of the time. When Stoick the Vast had granted her greatest wish on her eighteenth birthday â€" to be allowed to join the next voyage â€" she'd been so excited. She'd spent most of the night polishing her axe, shield, and armor. Then she'd gotten on the boat.

Four days. On a boat. With a bunch of smelly slugs as company. There was not a single word in the stories she'd heard about the pain of those four days.

When they'd reached their destination " the Bog Burglars " their chief wouldn't even let them off the dock, much less listen to the reason they'd come. The woman had simply crossed her arms under her ample chest, stood on the dock, and stared at them. Eventually the leader of the Hooligan party, a man by the name of Baggybum the Beerbelly, had simply pushed away from the dock and set them on their slow way home.

Astrid scowled and kicked at the side of the boat, glaring out at the stars now that night had fallen. An absolute and utter failure, that's what this mission was. And now she would have to sit in this gods-forsaken bit of wood for another four days until they got home and tried to explain it all to Chief Stoick.

She couldn't help but wonder if things would have gone differently if she'd been in charge. She dreamed of things she could have said. She pictured being welcomed by Big-Boobied Berta with wide arms and full guest rights, herself being the first to step off the boat.

"Don't take it so hard," lamented Tuffnut as the male half of the twin terrors dropped to sit near her. Astrid shot him a glare as she curled her fingers tighter around the handle of her axe. "My first time out was a complete failure too." The boy waved his thin fingers in the air, as if sketching a picture. "A gronckle almost carried me away!"

Astrid unclenched her teeth long enough to spit out an, "I've heard." And she had. Many, many times.

Tuffnut blinked at her, then scowled. "What's up your butt?"

"This was my first real mission. It was supposed to set the tone for the rest of my life." Astrid watched the moonlight glint off the sharpened edge of her blade. She wasn't really sure if she was more angry, frustrated, or disappointed. The sting of failure wouldn't be so bad if she weren't trapped on a boat with a dozen people who didn't seem to care one bit that the mission had gone downhill.

"Eh," the boy scoffed. "There're always more missions."

Astrid snapped out, "That's not the point!" Her first voyage as an adult. She would forever be remembered in the tales of her future battles as having failed on her first try.

Tuffnut screwed up his face, looking ready to argue, but a loud thud and a subtle rocking of the boat made him pause and look around. The others on the boat stopped their chatter and the area fell into silence. The waves lapped softly against the creaking planks.

Astrid saw it first. A dark something latched onto the prow of the ship. "There," she whispered as she drew her feet underneath her, eyeing the shadow and changing her grip on her axe. The only thing it could be in the middle of the night, in the middle of the ocean, was

something with wings. A dragon. Finally, a way to call this mess of a mission something near a success. If only she could kill it before the others-

A round ball-shaped object was tossed onto the deck of the ship. It bounced a few times before bursting into flame, a tiny fire that glowed brightly in the bow of the boat and throwing all the Vikings into sudden light. Astrid's eyes watered, but she didn't take her eyes off the shadow. In the light, she could see her 'dragon' was actually a human, dressed in strange black armor, a helm on his head and his face covered with a mask, crouched on top of the prow, perfectly balanced, seeming to not care about the movement of the waves.

"Who in Thor's name are you?" Baggybum demanded. Astrid watched the giant of a man climb unsteadily to his feet "he'd been indulging too much in the cask of mead they'd brought to give to the Bog Burglars and were now bringing back home with them" and silently echoed the question in her head.

Her eyes narrowed when the strange man didn't answer, instead choosing to slowly scan the inhabitants of the ship.

"Answer me," Baggybum roared, grabbing a mace from the boat's deck and brandishing it above his head. "And tell us how you got to be on our boat."

Astrid's gaze darted out over the dark waves. They were hours away from the closest bit of land. When she glanced back at the man, he had pulled a knife out of somewhere and was playing with it. It bobbed up and down in the air, confidently caught with each toss, not a care for the leagues of water just under his feet.

"Why is it I must answer your questions?" The man's voice was smooth, a soft baritone, and almost sounded teasing. Green eyes glinted from above the mask.

Baggybum looked momentarily confused, then infuriated. "I'll have your head!" The man took a few steps forwards, swinging with the mace, before a freak wave batted the boat sideways and nearly toppled the overweight leader of the Viking troop into the water.

The stranger didn't even seem to notice the sharp rocking of the boat. He just tossed his knife and caught it again, then slid down to stand on the deck. "I believe you were asking for me."

Astrid stiffened. "Gargle," she whispered.

Gargle the Gruesome "a stranger that had been wandering the archipelago for the past few years. Tales of his heroism, strength, and intelligence spread like wildfire. When their chief had heard rumors that the man had been in the area helping out the Bog Burglars, Stoick had sent the group out to come to an arrangement with Gargle. Of course, that plan had been ruined when Bertha had refused to even let them off the stupid boat.

"How did you get on our boat?" Baggybum asked again, his tone still drippy with fury.

The man moved like nothing Astrid had ever seen. One moment he was

standing at the bow of the boat, the next he had the massive form of Baggybum laid out on the deck with a foot on his neck. The knife glittered as it was tossed into the air, uncaring about the man trapped under his heel. "I am Gargle the Gruesome," he said darkly. "I am the spawn of lightning and death itself. _Don't_ question me."

The tiny ball of fire chose that moment to flare, throwing Gargle's black armor in sharp relief. Baggybum, who appeared to have hit his head when he fell, did little more than moan in response.

"You." Gargle turned and pointed to Tuffnut. "Why were you asking for me?"

"Umâ€¦" Tuffnut hesitated, startled by being thrown into the spotlight.

"The Red Death," Astrid cut in. The man's eyes drifted over to hers. In the firelight, she could see a scar that cut across part of his face and vanished under his mask. Undoubtedly, Gargle's name had been earned. "Our chief wants to destroy it."

"The Red Death," the man repeated softly. "Do you know what it is?"

Astrid slowly got to her feet, axe at her side. "A dragon. Larger than anyone can imagine."

The man's eyes narrowed. "I've seen her. You're underestimating her."

"The dragons are destroying our tribe. It's the leader." Astrid glanced down at Tuffnut, who nodded his head in agreement.

"The dragons have been 'destroying' your tribe for generations," the man said blandly. "What makes now different?"

Tuffnut spoke up. "We have a plan?"

The man almost sounded like he chuckled. "A plan. One that requires my help?"

"We could come to an agreement." Astrid's chin crept up a few notches so that she was staring down her nose at Gargle.

He was quiet. He tossed his knife a few times, glanced around at the people on the boat, and said, "I'll think on it." With one last disdainful nudge of his foot, Gargle left the prone form of Baggybum and kicked the still burning ball of fire over the edge of the boat and into the water. The boat was plunged back into the night. Then he leapt onto the railing of the boat, perfectly balanced. "You might hear from me, you might not."

He jumped over the edge. Despite the water only a few feet below the railing, there was no splash. He disappeared in a whip of wind.

Astrid walked over to the railing, staring down into the water as the ball of fire on the deck burned itself out. As the ship was plunged back into the darkness of night, lit only by the moon and stars, she

shook her head and tried not to think about how the man had gotten out to their boat. The spawn of lightning and death indeed. She shuddered and backed up a step.

Then a smile flicked at the corner of her lips. Perhaps the mission hadn't been as much of a failure as she'd thought.

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><p>Having finished unpacking her small bag at her home, Astrid grabbed her axe and headed out into the woods. After being trapped on a boat for eight days with very little room to move around, her body was cramped and in need of movement. It would be several hours before the chief called them for a report on their mission.<p>

An almost feral grin split her face as she paced into the woods, weighing her axe carefully in her hand. How many trees would die today? She mentally set a goal, notched it up a bit, and made her way to the clearing.

The axe thunked loudly into the first tree â€" not quite a deathblow, a bit too low â€" when a voice yelled a, "Hey!"

Astrid scowled, furious that her first time in a week to stretch was interrupted. She spun around the glare at the source of the noise, then felt her back stiffen. Reddish-brown hair, a bit too long for his face. Greenish eyes. An annoying smirk on his face, along with the faint scars from his first encounter with a Nightmare. "Hiccup," she seethed as she stalked away to grab her axe. Hiccup the Utterly Useless. "Decided to actually show up today?"

"I was here first," the young man said, his voice bordering on uncertain. When Astrid shot him a glare, he was quick to backpedal. "Or, or, I can just go somewhereâ€¦ else." The boy stuck his charcoal behind his ear and got to his feet, fumbling with the book in his hands and nearly dropping it.

"Odin's missing eye, Hiccup, you're eighteen. Grow a backbone," she said, yanking on the axe. It was firmly lodged into the tree. Rather than be seen pulling ineffectively on it, she left it there and turned around, arms crossed.

"I have one, thank you," Hiccup retorted with that stupid smile on his face. His charcoal was staining the side of his face black. The boy rolled his eyes, his voice taking on a sarcastic tone. "Back from your extremely _dangerous_ voyage?"

"Yes." Her tone was clipped â€" but she really didn't feel bad. The useless male had stolen her chance for being first place in dragon training when they'd been younger â€" and then had completely botched it. He'd dazzled everyone with his tricks until the final bout when everybody had gathered to watch. The Nightmare had nearly mauled the boy to death in the few moments it had taken Stoick to stop the fight. Even though it had been a few years, the memory still stung. She'd have killed the Nightmare and bathed in its blood.

Hiccup flinched away from the look. "I was looking for more than a 'yes'," he muttered. Walking across the small clearing - only stumbling once - he grabbed the axe, pushed the bottom of the handle towards the tree, and easily levered the weapon from the bark's grip.

"Here-"

Astrid snatched it back. "Don't touch my stuff."

"Don't leave it hanging in a tree." His voice was hesitant. His eyes glanced at her sidelong and he crossed his arms over his chest. It was a look his father could pull off and look intimidating. With Hiccup's skinny form, it made him look like a misshapen tree.

She elbowed him. Hard. As he doubled over, gasping for air and complaining, she stalked away, eyes fixing on the next tree that would die. She could picture Hiccup standing in front of it and silently aimed for his imaginary head. "Why are you here, anyways? Go disappear, like you usually do."

Hiccup straightened. "I don't _disappear_," he complained. "I'm working on aæ| project."

The axe tumbled gracefully through the air, smacking the imaginary Hiccup straight between the eyes. Astrid smirked in delight. "Whatever." She turned to glare at the boy. "Just leave."

He hesitated, his mouth working like he had something in mind to say, but he just shrugged and vanished into the trees. Astrid wondered when he'd be back. The nuisance was gone more than not, lately æ" often for days or even weeks at a time. Even his father, Stoick the Vast, seemed relieved when the boy left to work on his stupid _project_.

Snatching her axe from the tree, she aimed for another, this time picturing a vicious dragon hissing at her. The axe flew, shining in the sunlight, and she never noticed that she was being watched not by one set of green eyes.

But by two.

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><p>It took Baggybum a grand total of three minutes to explain their voyage and how the encounter with the Bog Burglars had gone. Astrid felt like she wanted to sink into the ground the entire time.<p>

Chief Stoick stood before the small group, a frown on his face as he listened to the tale of woe and despair. The chair next to him, which should have held his only son and heir, was empty æ" as usual. "Wouldn't even let you get off the dock?" he rumbled, rubbing at his mustache.

"We left, honor intact," Baggybum continued emphatically, gesturing wildly with his arms, "and we tracked down the hero despite the Bog Burglars. I met Gargle the Gruesome, face to face." Baggybum stood a bit straighter. "He's not nearly as terrifying as the tales put him."

Astrid barely contained her eye roll. From the snort coming out of Tuffnut beside her, he wasn't nearly as successful. The large man had smoothed over the fact that Gargle had found _them_, and that the man had trounced Baggybum in less time than it took to blink.

"You have secured an agreement, then?" Stoick looked somewhat surprised, an eyebrow arching.

"No," Baggybum said slowly. "He said he needed some time to think and he would come talk to you when he... thought."

Stoick frowned. "So we haven't-

The door to the hall slammed open. Everyone started, reaching for various weapons as eyes turned to the black-armored man stalking into the hall. He stopped a few feet in, the doors wide open behind him letting in the evening sun. His helm glinted silver, etched with strange knots and patterns, the mask black against his skin. A sword dangled at his side.

Astrid saw Stoick reach for the nearest weapon and she stepped forwards to forestall whatever fight would erupt. "Chief Stoick, this is Gargle the Gruesome."

The chief hesitated, still taking up the weapon but not brandishing it like he was going to kill the intruder. "We do not hide our faces in this hall."

The man crossed his arms. "I am not called Gruesome for nothing. I will keep the mask on." His voice carried easily over the whispers of the Hooligans huddled in the room. "Or I will leave. Your decision."

Stoick's eye twitched, then he apparently chose to change the subject. "We have a plan to defeat the Red Death."

"So I have heard," the man said, almost chuckling as his eyes scanned the room. They seemed exceedingly green under the silvery glint of his helmet. "And you have determined that I am required for the successful completion of thisâ€¦ plan."

"The tales I've heard say you have never failed in battle, even against the greatest of odds," Stoick said. He walked forwards a few steps, making his head of height on the smaller Gargle more obvious. Crossing his arms over his chest made the muscles stand out. "That you have the gods on your side."

"Stories," Gargle murmured as his eyes glanced towards Baggybum, "change like the wind. And they are fickle as the wind as well."

Astrid gave a little start as her mind quietly informed her that the lean and wiry man in front of her was too young to be spouting off something like that. Her eyes narrowed as she took in his movements, his eyes, trying to determine his age. She'd expected someone in his late twenties or even thirties with the tales that were told. But, now that she was watching and looking, the man seemed barely older than her.

"Nonetheless," the man continued blandly, "I have decided to aid you with yourâ€¦ plan." The quiet pause before the last word seemed to hold a smirk.

"What is your price?"

Gargle tipped his head slowly to the side. "How badly do you wish my assistance?" he asked quietly. Then folded his arms across his chest in a lanky mockery of the chief's pose. "I find time as a voyaging hero passes by slowly. In return for destroying the Red Death, I would require a companion for my travels."

Stoick blinked and let his arms unfold. Astrid looked around in surprise as well. That wasn't a price â€" that was a prize. Who wouldn't leap at the chance to go journeying with a hero?

"A female companion," the man continued. "A wife. A strong one, able to survive the life I would grant her. A warrior and a hero of her own right."

Astrid turned her gaze down to her toes, tightening her fingers into fists. There was the catch. To be yanked from the freedom of life and tied down into a marriage. Her face curled into a sneer and her shoulders squared. She would never marry. She was a Shield Maiden â€" or at least most of the way to becoming one.

"Marriages are arranged within families," Stoick said slowly. "I cannot-"

"That one." The man's voice held no emotion.

Astrid had to glance up to see who he was pointing to. Then her face paled, her eyes widened, and her stomach started to roil.

He was pointing at her.

2. The Blackest of Night

HaiJu continues to do a much better betaing job than I deserve. :) As I have not seen the entire movie (two movies now?) she's doing an awesome job helping me keep everyone straight._

Thanks to Guest, Rahne-Aamar, sdphantom10, MsFrizzle, Rasengalia, Ink Droplett, Roxy Emeralds, moleking, InfinitiumAce, and Pterodactyl for their reviews. :D_

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>A How to Train Your Dragon Fanfic by Cori<p>

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><p>The Blackest of Night<p>

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><p>Astrid absolutely, positively hated the main doors to the hall of the Hooligan chief. She'd never had any feelings about them before, but now she despised them like nothing else. They didn't even have the courtesy to wilt under her glare like many Vikings did.

After the hero, Gargle, had pointed to her, she'd been tossed from the meeting, the doors had slammed shut, and her parents had been

summoned to deal with the proposed marriage arrangement. Not that Astrid was against voyaging with someone who had so many stories told of his deeds at such a young age. But _marriage_? She wasn't ever going to marry. Shield Maidens pledged their lives to battle - not to _men_.

So she stood there, her nose inches from the doors, glaring at the wood that had been darkened by age and hundreds of hands. Her axe was heavy on her back, her fingers tight from being held in tense fists.

What was taking them so long?

"How long are you going to stand there?" came a soft voice.

Astrid flinched and spun around, glaring into the eyes of... She hesitated, blinked, and glanced back at the hall's doors. They hadn't opened. She was sure of it. How had _he_ gotten out here?

Gargle snorted softly from his position lounged against the wall. His eyes gleamed from under his helm. "Do you have magic flowing through your veins, warrior-girl, that you might burst them into flame?"

"I'm not marrying anyone," Astrid informed him stiffly.

"That's what your parents said," he replied evenly.

Astrid took a deep - somewhat shaky - breath, relief flooding through her. Her chin crept up a few inches. Her parents knew what she wanted with her life, and had long since accepted it. They wouldn't force her to marry. "So?"

The man held out his knife, presumably the one he'd been tossing up and down in the air earlier. "Here."

Astrid took the offered weapon, examining it a moment. It was a beautiful knife, finely forged out of a type of metal she'd never seen before. Runes and patterns glinted on the blade, and the handle was wrapped in a soft leather. "What is this?"

"It's called a knife." Humor danced in Gargle's voice.

"I got that," Astrid said with a frown, resting the knife on her knuckles to test its balance. It seemed to be perfectly weighted for throwing. "Why are you giving it to me?"

Gargle hesitated. Astrid glanced up at him, her forehead furrowing. It took a few seconds before the man shrugged a shoulder. "It's an engagement present," he said bluntly.

_What? _She almost stopped breathing, her thoughts jangling together in a painful mess. "But... my parents..." she said in disbelief.

"Your chief got them to change their mind. They've agreed to our marriage," the man continued, his voice no more emotional than if he were speaking of the weather. "However, I do not believe in forced marriage. I will help your tribe defeat the Red Death and, when the battle is won, I will ask you to marry me. At that point, you can say

yes or no."

A slow trickle of air slid from her lips. She blinked a few times.

A hand - warm, despite the gloves - touched her chin and forced her to look into his eyes. The man's eyes were sharp and dark green in the shadows of his helmet. "Do you understand?" he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Slowly, she nodded.

His eyes wrinkled at the corners. Perhaps he was smiling. "What is your name, warrior-girl?"

"Astrid Hofferson." The words sounded hollow in her ears, her brain still not fully processing what was happening.

"Well then, Astrid. I will see you around."

She nodded, her fingers still limply holding her _engagement present_ as the man vanished into the shadows. For the longest time, she just stood there, processing through what she'd just been told.

When the doors creaked open and her mother stuck her head through the opening, Astrid turned to look at her. Anger pounded in her veins. "You're going to make me get married?" she breathed, fury mixing with frustration and hopelessness.

"Oh, Astrid," her mother whispered, stepping out of the hall. "It won't be so bad. It's what's best for the tribe."

As her dreams of her future as a Shield Maiden collapsed around her ears, fury whipped through her mind. "I don't care-" she choked off what she was about to say, knowing her temper wouldn't get her anywhere. Several other Vikings glanced out through the open door. "I want to be a Shield Maiden."

Her mother said something, but Astrid was beyond listening. Instead, she was fighting back tears of frustration. Years and years of effort and sacrifices... for nothing. She turned her back on her parents and her tribe and stalked away, swiping furiously at her eyes once she was out of sight and barely stopping herself before she cut her face with the knife in her hands. Curling her fingers tightly around the handle of the knife, she reared back to throw it -

Then paused. Something Gargle had said finally trickled into her consciousness. His strangely soothing voice whispered, "_A__t that point, you can say yes or no."_

"I say no," she breathed, lowering her hand back to her side as her dreams came rushing back full-force. "Always." Her arms trembled with the force of her fingers clenched around the knife. When the day came that the Red Death was gone and the _hero_ walked up to her, she would tell him 'no'.

Until then, perhaps she could learn a few of his secrets.

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><p>Hiccup actually showed up for the evening meal - for the first

time in months. Astrid sat at a different table, keeping her thoughts to herself. Most of the Hooligan tribe avoided Hiccup, leaving the lanky young man to eat by himself. Hiccup didn't seem to mind.<p>

Astrid's new knife sat at the table beside her plate. Several Vikings had come up to her to examine the beautiful blade. Regardless of her thoughts on the engagement and marriage agreement, Astrid was starting to feel a small swell of pride every time her knife was complimented. It was a very well-crafted weapon, its hilt wrapped in - so one of the old women had told her - shed dragon hatchling skin. The handle itself could fetch enough to pay for a week's food for the entire tribe. The entire knife could probably purchase several boats full.

Her parents, of course, had taken this as a sign that her betrothed was a very wealthy man on top of being heroic and a powerful Viking. They'd been beyond pleased with this development to the arrangement, already planning for what it would mean for their family. When her father had started suggesting names for her first born son, Astrid had nearly thrown her new knife into his chest. Both had listened to her repeated denials that she would ultimately not have to go through with the arrangement. Neither had really believed her.

"Oooh, pretty," Ruffnut said as she dropped onto the bench, set down her meal, and picked up the knife. "Not that your future husband is pretty, but if he can give you knives like this, who cares?"

Astrid rolled her eyes. Ruffnut's parents had just announced an arrangement between them and Fishleg's family. The two would be wed in the following spring. "I'm not getting married," Astrid repeated for what felt like the thousandth time that evening.

"Give the girl a break," Tuffnut muttered, dropping down beside his sister. "She has to marry _Fishlegs_." The male twin shuddered. "At least yours is a hero."

"Fishlegs is a warrior," Astrid said, more in Ruffnut's defense than with any real meaning behind it. While Fishlegs had gone on a few raids, rumor had it that the young man had done rather poorly. The boy was more cut out for planning and behind the scenes work than actual raiding.

"Whatever," Tuffnut scoffed with a roll of his eyes, then glanced down at his sister's food. "You gonna eat that or stare at it?"

Ruffnut yanked her plate out of the reach of his grasping fingers.

"Did they talk about anything else at the meeting?" Astrid asked, using her bread to soak up some of the blood collecting on her plate. "About the plan to kill the Red Death?"

Ruffnut gave her brother one last glare before setting her plate down and turning to Astrid. "They've got a meeting set up for tomorrow morning. They're going to explain the plan to Gargle." She slapped one of Tuffnut's hands away, then grabbed her meat and took a huge bite. "You know what the guy looks like under his mask yet?"

Astrid shook her head. "I don't want to."

"Aren't you going to kiss him?" Tuffnut cut in, still pouting over his slapped hand.

"No." Astrid shook her head firmly. "I'm engaged so that we can get his help. I'm not marrying him. I'm not going to kiss him. I don't ever want to even lay an hand on him. As soon as the dragons are dead, I'm done with this."

The twins snorted in unison. "Sure," one of them drawled, identical disbelieving grins on their faces. "Greatest hero of his age," Ruffnut said, "and you're not going to take the chance to touch him? Did you see the way he moves? What it must look like under his armor..."

"Ew," Tuffnut said, shoving his sister slightly. "Male at the table. Keep the conversation on track."

Smirking, Astrid finished off the last few bites of her bread and left them to argue about appropriate conversations. She let her eyes wander the hall, startled to find Hiccup the Completely Useless gazing in her direction. The boy gave her a small smile and a wave. Astrid wrenched her eyes away and picked up the knife, tossing it lightly in the air like she'd seen Gargle do. It really did fly well.

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><p>Unable to fall sleep later that night, Astrid walked through the village. The moon was nearly full, casting more than enough light for her to see. A few fires glinted through windows. Shadows moved in houses as people got ready to sleep.<p>

She sighed, fingering her axe. She wanted to go out into the woods and use up some energy killing trees, but it was far too dangerous. Things stalked the woods at night. Not that she was afraid of them - just that there was no point in trying to get yourself mauled in the dark of night. So she contented herself with wandering aimlessly through the small Hooligan tribe.

Stars glittered overhead. She looked up, tracing pictures in the sky. Thor with his hammer. Fenrir the wolf. Loki the trickster.

A slight sound brought her attention back to her own planet. She paused, listening carefully. Another slight sound. Dry autumn eaves being crushed. She waited, pinpointing the sound, before whirling and leaping in that direction. She yelled, her axe coming into her hands, hoping that she'd just startled a deer or some other bit of local fauna rather than the start of yet another dragon raid.

Instead, her axe came within inches of severing Gargle the Gruesome's head from his shoulders.

"Astrid," he greeted. The man was sitting under a tree, a handful of dried leaves in his hands. He didn't even glance at the axe.

"What are you doing?" Astrid demanded, her heart pounding in her chest at the idea of what she had almost done. "Are you following me?"

The man arched an eyebrow. "I wouldn't sink that low," he said, his voice edging towards a laugh. "I've been sitting here, watching you pace."

She let the axe slowly lower. "Why?"

He shrugged, a lazy gesture as he got to his feet. "What else is there to do in this town?" He took a few steps backwards, towards the forest. "Come here."

Thoughts of what a man could do to her when she was lost in the woods at night flipped through her mind. She dismissed most of them. She was Astrid Hofferson - greatest female warrior in a generation. She could deal with anything this man could throw at her. "What's out there?"

"Shadows," the man said with a grin. "The monsters that haunt your darkest nightmares."

She hadn't moved yet, still debating putting her axe back in its place at her hip. "You don't know my nightmares."

"You afraid?" Gargle taunted.

"No." Her arms crossed over her chest. Almost unbidden, her feet took a few steps forwards. Towards the mystery of the forest and what Gargle was offering. Away from the protection and safety of her tribe.

The man snorted softly. "I want to show you something."

"You want to show me something? In the woods I've lived in all my life? And you've been here for, what, a few hours?" Astrid almost laughed at the thought. She watched him tip his head slightly to the side. Stalking right up to him - she wasn't afraid of him or the dark woods - she set her axe into her belt and stuck a finger in his face. He was nearly a head taller than her. "I'll make you a deal. You tell me something, I'll follow you."

"Deal," he said without hesitation.

Astrid froze, started that he'd given in so fast.

"You're my betrothed. I'll tell you anything," the man finished, as if he could hear her thoughts. His hands were loose by his sides, his black armor nearly blending in with the darkened trees. If Astrid hadn't known he was standing there, hadn't heard him deliberately rustle those leaves, she never would have known he was watching her.

"Why do you choose me?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

His eyes crinkled slightly. "You..." This time it was his turn to hesitate. "You're a warrior. You're brave and strong, but you have the ability to think. And, I believe, to change." His voice was soft, the ending something almost uncertain.

"Change?"

"The Vikings are losing the war," he said, shaking his head. "If nothing changes, the Vikings will cease to exist. Not just because of the she-dragon - the Red Death." He was quiet a long moment. "You haven't been the places that I've been. Seen what I've seen. This?" He gestured towards the village. "This isn't going to last much longer."

Astrid raised her chin. "The Vikings will never back down."

He sighed - almost a laugh. "And that's why you'll lose." His voice was sad. His hand came up and touched her on the nose. Astrid flinched backwards, but Gargle didn't seem to care. He just let out a short breath through his nose. "Does that answer your question?"

"No," she shot back.

"Too bad," he chuckled. "It's the one you're getting. Now come on."

Astrid waited a few beats, shooting a glance back towards the fires burning in the fireplaces of her village. When she looked back, Gargle had vanished into the shadows. Her teeth clenched, her feet shuffled, and then she stalked towards the trees. "Fine. Wait up."

She chased after what she thought was Gargle's form. Between his black armor and the shadows of the trees, she couldn't be sure she wasn't following a figment of her imagination. Only the occasional rustle of dead leaves up ahead told her there was really something there. Unconsciously, her fingers drifted to her axe. Her thoughts rampaged through images of the monstrous things that came out in the woods at night.

It took only a few minutes for her to stumble onto the clearing where she had practiced throwing her axe. The bright light of the moon made the grass and trees glow silver. "Gargle?" she whispered.

"Hold still," came the smooth baritone, fingers brushing up her sides. His warm body was pressed against her back, his moist breath against the side of her neck.

How had he gotten so close without her noticing? She tried to turn, but his fingers tightened. "Watch."

Something swirled past the stars overhead. It vanished into the trees on the other side of the clearing as soundlessly as Gargle had been. Astrid searched her thoughts, trying to put together what she'd seen. Black, maybe? A tail. Wings? "A dragon?" she hissed.

"Shhh," the man cautioned, his fingers tightening in warning. "Hold perfectly still."

The form - the dragon, Astrid was more and more sure - jumped from the trees on the far side of the clearing and landed on the ground with a gentle whoof. It slowly crept forwards, scales as black as night, eyes an acidic green, teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

"What kind of dragon is it?" Astrid breathed. Her fingers snuck towards her axe. She could kill this dragon.

"Night Fury," Gargle said softly.

Astrid felt her body tense. "Night Fury?" she repeated, her voice up a few notches. "Are you _insane?_"

"Relax," the man repeated. "You're fine. Just hold still."

"It's going to kill us!" she hissed through her teeth.

Gargle's strangely reassuring presence at her back vanished. He slunk past her, silent as a shadow, headed towards the dragon.

"No! Get back here!" she breathed. Her fingers grabbed her axe.

Grabbed her...

Grabbed...

She stared down at her side, startled. Her axe was gone! She felt around, noting that her knives were gone as well - including the one hidden on the side of her boot. She jerked her head back up to find the Night Fury and Gargle nose to nose.

She slowly lowered herself to the ground, grabbed the largest rock her trembling fingers could find, and held it ready to throw. Lit by moonlight, Gargle slowly reached out, his hand inches from the dragon's mouth, about to have his hand bitten off.

"NO!" she shouted, throwing the rock with all her might. It smashed into the dragon's head, earning her a low-pitched snarl. Weaponless, defenseless, Astrid spun on her heel and ran. Trees whipped past her in the darkness, swirls of shadow, and her feet tripped over rocks and fallen logs. She had to get back to the village. She had to warn them. "Night Fury!" she screamed, jumped over the small creek...

And she felt something scaly and sharp wrap around her arm. She shrieked, looking up to find the dragon's form blocking out the night sky. Acid green eyes flicked down towards her once, then the wings started to beat, taking her up higher and higher and away from the safety of her village.

3. Night Fury's Secret

_Sorry for the delay - my computer finally suffered a Massive Meltdown. It retained it's wonderful use as a laptop dinner table, and it's ability to be thrown at intruders and cause major bodily harm wasn't damaged... but the thing wouldn't turn on. I handed it over to the computer-doctors, who prescribed a new motherboard and a week of rest. I found myself trapped doing plebeian and torturous tasks like reading and drawing and such things as I waited for its return. :)
>

Thanks MsFrizzle, hiccupfan54, InfinitiumAce, Roxy Emeralds, BiblioMatsuri, Somebody105, Q-A the Authoress, moleking, and Guest for their reviews!

* * *

><p>Gargle the Gruesome
>A How to Train Your Dragon Fanfic by Cori<p>

* * *

><p>Night Fury's Secret<p>

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><p>Hiccup Haddock Horrendous III stared at the unconscious girl Toothless dropped carefully onto the ledge. He slipped out of the saddle, nervously running his fingers along the smooth scales on his dragon's side, then up to scratch at the sensitive skin near his ear. The dragon cooed. "Oh, none of this is going to plan..." he muttered.<p>

The dragon made a sour noise as Hiccup's fingers stopped their scratching, folding his legs underneath him and settling down to sleep. His tail curled up and around his nose, snorting derisively before closing his eyes for a nap.

Hiccup scowled. "I'm aware none of my ideas ever go to plan. You can shut it." He scrubbed his fingers through his hair, pushing the heavy helmet out of the way and glancing at the moon, before he settled down next to his dragon. His black armor blended in perfectly with Toothless's scales as he leaned against the warm flank.

Over the past several years, he'd slowly dropped hints to his Viking tribe about the demon lurking in the dragons' nest. When Fishlegs had come up with the name Red Death almost a year ago, the others had latched onto it. Hiccup's goal had been for the Hooligan tribe to believe that they'd come up with Hiccup's plan to defeat the Red Death on their own - leaving Hiccup the Useless out of the picture all together. Leaving his dragon a secret.

The thought had him gently scratching at Toothless's ears again. He couldn't imagine how fast his world would crumble if the others found out that he had a dragon for a best friend.

Everything had come crashing down several weeks ago when - quite suddenly and extremely unexpectedly - his father had put together the rumors he'd been hearing and gotten the plan going earlier than Hiccup had wanted. At least, thus far, Hiccup wasn't part of that plan.

Of course, he really hadn't planned on 'Gargle' being part of the plan either. 'Gargle' was a fun diversion, a way to train with Toothless and get away from the clinging Hooligan tribe, but 'Gargle' was supposed to have vanished long before the plan went into effect. Gone off to wherever he'd supposedly come from.

His gaze slowly turned to the girl lying on the rocky cliff. The marriage thing had been spun off the top of his head - the perfect way to get out of helping and to stop his father from attempting to hunt down 'Gargle' again. He'd assumed nobody would go through with it. Marrying a Shield Maiden to a perfect stranger? It was nearly unheard of. An unfulfillable demand.

...That they'd actually gone through with.

He almost couldn't keep back the desperate laugh as he thought about the fact that he was (sort-of technically) engaged to the girl of his dreams. Astrid Hofferson, the one he'd had a crush on since he was eight. He couldn't actually marry her of course - she hated him and called him utterly useless every chance she got - but for a few nights, he could allow himself to dream.

And dragging her here to meet Toothless? That had been a horrible idea built on impulse from watching her pace back and forth through the village one too many times. He'd often imagined what it would be like for Astrid to meet Toothless... to actually like Toothless. It was a recurring daydream to throw Astrid on his dragon's back and take her flying through the clouds and she'd fall in love...

With a snort, Hiccup crossed his arms over his chest. Who was he kidding? He was some sort of hopeless romantic - and that was something Astrid was very definitely not. This was Astrid Hofferson: Shield Maiden in training. There was no way Astrid would ever see a dragon as anything other than a monster to be killed. She wasn't going to let them take her flying.

Especially since they'd just literally kidnapped her.

He laughed anxiously, shaking his head and trying to force his mind into a new line of thought. Maybe this turn of events would be enough to throw 'Gargle' out of the picture for the Hooligans. There was no way Astrid would keep Toothless a secret. There was no way the Vikings would team up with someone who was friends with a dragon. Maybe this was what he needed to retire 'Gargle' for real and start just being Hiccup again.

Leaning his head back against Toothless, listening to the giant reptile slowly breathe in and out, Hiccup gazed out at the stars. He barely remembered what it was like being Hiccup anymore. It was just an act he played when his father needed him in the village. He didn't even know if he could be Hiccup the Useless anymore.

Then again, this mess he was in - introducing Astrid to Toothless, kidnapping her, being engaged to her, sticking around rather than heading for the hills like his better sense was telling him he should - was pure Hiccup. If he'd had any real sense, 'Gargle' would have disappeared two weeks ago when his father had first started muttering about sending a party out to find him. Honestly, if he was really as smart as Gobber kept telling him he was, Hiccup would have followed 'Gargle' into the sunset.

That, of course, wasn't an option. More than likely, his whole plan needed a solid re-think. Slowly, his eyes closed and he pushed his worries aside to deal with later. He'd found that plans were best made while hunting for breakfast.

Warm and safe in the grasp of his dragon with the moon bright overhead, he drifted to sleep. In his dreams that night, he defeated the Red Death, won the hand of the most beautiful maiden in the archipelago, and brokered some strange sort of peace treaty between the Viking hordes and the dragons.

* * *

><p>Astrid jerked awake. Her body ached from sleeping on the hard rock and in her armor. She pushed herself into a seated position, looking around in surprise as memories from last night flooded into her mind.<p>

She'd been kidnapped. By... a dragon?

Scrambling to her feet, she reached for her weapons, only to find them still missing. Her eyes swept the small ledge, but when no dragons met her gaze, her body slowly relaxed. Nothing had eaten her. The beast wasn't lying around, waiting for her to wake up so she could be toyed with prior to her death.

She walked carefully to the edge of the cliff. The rock went straight down, much farther than she could jump and survive, and waves smashed into the base of the cliff. Above her, the rock arched upwards dozens of feet, nearly flat and almost as smooth as glass. There would be no climbing up or down. The ledge itself was about seven feet wide, perhaps two dozen long - a tapered shape that resembled the deck of a longboat. It was completely devoid of life.

"Great. So I've been left to starve," she grumbled. No weapons, no food, no water.

Her fingers clenched into fists as her thoughts turned from her predicament to Gargle and what she'd seen last night. The man had been... what? Petting the monster? And then what had happened? Everything after throwing the rock and heading back to the village was a blur. She pressed a fist to her temple, trying to demand her brain begin to function.

A whisper of wind was all the warning she had. She jerked backwards as a huge black form flashed into her field of vision. "No!" she yelled, stumbling over a rock and falling onto her back.

Her death flashed before her eyes as the dragon from the previous night - a hulking, snarling Night Fury, landed on the rock cliff only feet away and leaned over to inspect her. She stared into its acid eyes, its fishy breath loud in her ears.

Then a voice calmly said, "Toothless."

The dragon's head instantly vanished from before her face, pulled back to examine something perched on its back. Astrid crab-walked backwards, her eyes fixed on the dragon and... Was there a person on its back? Her mouth fell open as she recognized the young man and watched him slide easily from a saddle placed between the beast's wings.

"Relax," he said, gazing at her a moment before turning to the bags on the back of the monster. He took out a dozen fish, and dropped them to the ground along with a bundle of sticks. "Breakfast?"

She let out a shaky breath, her fingers scrambling for a loose rock she could use to bash the beast's head in - the man's too. Was he truly asking the dragon if it wanted her for breakfast?

The dragon made a chuffing noise, grabbing a fish and swallowing it whole. Its razor-sharp teeth gleamed in the sunrise, a long tongue

swiping its lips and leaving trails of goo behind. Astrid couldn't help but wonder if she would be next on its menu.

"Save some for us, will you?" Gargle muttered, batting at the monster's head as he grabbed the sticks and arranged them into a small campfire. "Would you mind?"

With a huffing noise, the dragon's eyes drifted towards the fish, then to the campfire.

Gargle rolled his eyes and laughed. "Yes, you get most of the fish. Light the fire."

The high-pitched whine was like a sound out of Astrid's nightmare. Her fingers almost went numb as the beast turned its head in her direction, opened its maw, and let out a blast of flame. She flinched backwards, pushing herself against the rock face, determined not to scream as she was roasted alive...

Only, no heat touched her. She slowly turned back to the dragon, noting the cheerily burning campfire and Gargle slowly setting a few of the fish up to cook. "What?" she whispered, struggling to slow her heart. It was beating furiously in her ears.

Gargle glanced up at her at the noise. "This is Toothless," he said, gesturing in the direction of the huge Night Fury.

The dragon grabbed another fish.

"Why is it here?" she had to ask, her sweaty fingers tight around the rock she'd found. Her back pressed against the wall, almost like she would go through it if she could push hard enough.

"_He_," Gargle said, stressing the pronoun, "is one of the only ways down."

She swallowed hard. "Is it going to eat us?"

Poking at the fish, Gargle sighed. "_He_ likes fish." He glanced over at the dragon, who seemed to be gleefully hoarding the remaining few fish into a pile between its front legs. "Can't get him to eat much else." Gargle let out a small groan at that. "And, so, it's really all I get to eat too."

The dragon snorted at the attention, a bit of smoke blasting towards the black-armored young man, then sorted out the next fish to be eaten.

"I... I..." Astrid desperately wanted to understand what was going on, but she couldn't bring herself to say the words. She just stared at the monstrous reptile.

"Hungry?" Gargle said suddenly, interrupting her thoughts. When she jerked around to glare at him, the young man was holding a cooked fish speared on a stick in her direction. "It's pretty good. I've gotten pretty good at cooking fish."

Astrid did not want a fish, although she was somewhat hungry. Her eyes narrowed and her fingers twitched around her rock, her emotions warring between fear and anger. "What is it you think you're

doing?"

"Hm?" Gargle shrugged, sitting down and picking off pieces of the fish he'd offered her. He pushed aside the mask slightly to eat. Astrid quietly noted that the man was clean-shaven with a nice-looking chin. "What do you mean?"

"Why am I here?"

"Ah." The fire cracked as Gargle shrugged. He waited a long few beats longer than necessary to answer. "I wanted you to meet my best friend."

Astrid waited for more than that. She forced her eyes off the beast long enough to glance around, searching for this 'best friend', before the answer became blindingly obvious. "The dragon is your best friend?" The words could barely choke out of her throat in disbelief.

Gargle studied her, his green eyes lightened by the fire and the early morning light. "So?"

"It's a dragon!" she yelped. "It eats Vikings for a living. Do you know how many of us it's killed?"

The Night Fury growled low in its throat, turning its acid-green eyes on her. The young man turned his head towards the beast, then back to her. "He didn't kill me. And he didn't kill you. And he doesn't eat Vikings - I told you, he only eats fish."

Astrid scrambled to her feet, eyes wide, unable to understand what she was hearing. "What kind of monster are you?" she demanded. "Vikings aren't friends with demons!"

She almost saw it coming. Gargle was across the fire and inches from her within a blink of the eye, his gaze boring into hers. She brought the rock up to slam into his head, but the man's hand had clamped around her arm, holding it still. His body pressed against hers, holding her against the cliff face. "Toothless has saved my life more often than you can imagine." His voice was barely louder than the breeze, but it was as sharp as a knife. His fingers tightened around her wrist. "He's more than a friend to me - he's the only family I have that cares about me. You can insult me all you want, but leave Toothless out of it."

She didn't dare reply. Her mouth was clamped shut, her breath leaving her nose in shaking bursts. If there was one thing in the world she could sincerely appreciate, it was a solid threat with the ability to back it up.

"Toothless isn't going to hurt you." His voice had softened slightly. "I'm not going to hurt you. And you're not going to hurt us."

It wasn't a question or a compromise, but Astrid slowly nodded anyways.

He let go of her wrist, allowing her hand to fall to her side. The heavy rock tumbled from her fingers and clattered on the ground. Backing up a few paces, Gargle gazed at her before turning his back and heading back to the fire to snag another fish. "Breakfast?" he

said, his tone back to the gentle one he'd used earlier. "They're not as good once they get cold."

She couldn't bring herself to move. She stared at the man - the hero of the stories they'd been hearing for the last few years - and then at the dragon he called his best friend. The beast chose that moment to look up at her and slowly lick its tongue over one of its eyes. Its lips pulled back in an odd, toothless grin and its tail thumped against the ground.

Very slowly, she inched away from the wall and over to the fire. She reached for the last fish, snagged it, and scuttled back to where she'd been. She tore off little bits of fish, almost burning her fingers in the process, and slowly ate her way through her breakfast.

It was nearly fifteen minutes of horrible silence before Gargle got up and went over to scratch the dragon's ears. The monster cooed and tipped its head, clearly enjoying the treatment. Kicking the remaining embers of fire and fish bones over the edge of the cliff, the man turned to gaze at her. "There's a meeting soon in the hall. I'll need to be back for it."

Astrid nodded slowly.

"I'm assuming you'd like to go home?"

Astrid wasn't stupid. Her eyes chased over to the dragon. It was very clearly the only way off this bit of cliff. "Yes," she whispered, although her heart clenched at the idea of what she was (probably) about to do.

Gargle wandered around the dragon, slowly tightening straps here and there before climbing on to sit between the dragon's wings. The monster chuffed again, shaking itself a bit to settle everything properly, and turned its reptilian eyes on her. The man held out a hand for her to grab.

Fingers tight in fists, she stalked towards the dragon. She was somewhat convinced the beast wouldn't eat her by this point - at least not with Gargle around - but she didn't trust it one bit. Her body edged around its head, eying the saddle-like contraption on its back. Batting Gargle's hand away, she pulled herself up and gingerly found a place behind his back.

"You're going to want to hold on," Gargle said.

"Why-" she started, but the dragon lunged off the edge of the cliff. Her fingers raced forwards and grabbed onto Gargle's shoulders, yanking herself close and pressing her legs firmly in to the dragon's side. She could hear the man chuckle as the dragon slowed its fall and steadied them into a slow glide. Her home hovered just over the horizon in the distance.

"It's not so bad," he said over his shoulder.

Astrid didn't bother to answer. Her lips were firmly clamped shut to keep herself from screaming in a way that was very unfitting for a Shield Maiden - being this far in the air as a human was unnatural! She kept her eyes fixed on her homeland.

Gargle's head shook slightly. He leaned forwards to pet the dragon, muttering something to it under his breath.

It took far too long to reach the forest outside her home. Astrid slid from the monster's back almost before it had completely settled to the ground, already striding towards the village. A hand snagged her elbow before she could make it more than a few steps, twisting her around. "What?" she snapped.

"You can't tell them."

She stared past the man's helmet to the dragon that was snuffling around in the grass. "Why in Thor's name shouldn't I?" she demanded.

"Because I'll leave," he answered calmly. "I'm sure your tribe will enjoy defeating the Red Death without me."

Her teeth clenched tightly. Her fingers twitched, half-tempted to wrap themselves around this stranger's throat. "You are friends with the enemy," she said.

There was a quiet beat. "No," he said. His voice held a strange note of sadness. "I think you'll find that I'm not."

Ripping her elbow free of his grasp, Astrid glared up at him. Back on her home soil, without a deadly fall only seconds away, she dared to challenge him. "Oh yeah? You're a traitor to your own kind!"

His eyes tightened and darkened, but he didn't move.

"That's a dragon. Its kind have killed hundreds of ours. They steal our food so we starve in the winter. They destroy our town so we freeze in the snow. There isn't a single family in our tribe that hasn't lost someone to those monsters!" Her breath hitched in her throat.

Gargle waited, apparently trying to tell if she was done with her rant. "Maybe you should stop a moment and consider something." His voice was hard as ice.

"Yeah?" she sneered, crossed her arms. "And what's that?"

He took a small step backwards. "That maybe I'm not the one who's the traitor to my kind." His fingers snapped, which brought the Night Fury's head up from the bush it was investigating. The beast galloped over to him, pushing its head under Gargle's arm.

Astrid shook her head, then stared at the monster. Was he implying that the dragon had turned on its own kind? "It'd help us fight the Red Death?" she asked slowly.

The dragon seemed to understand the question. At the mention of the giant she-dragon, the beast's eyes narrowed dangerously, a dark growl thrumming through the woods. All the creatures of the forest - the birds and bugs - all fell completely silent.

She didn't need to see the mirroring expression on Gargle's face to understand what the monster meant. "By Thor, yes," the man said. "He

hates the Red Death more than the two of us combined."

Her gaze flitted between the two. A stranger-hero in black armor to the black dragon. A perfectly matched set. Twisting on her heel, she stalked from the clearing.

"You won't tell them," Gargle said. His voice carried easily in the quiet woods.

"No," she finally admitted. Not yet, anyways.

Something slammed into a tree just in front of her. Then several more items. Astrid stared at them - noting her axe and several knives inches apart on the tree trunk. "You forgot those," Gargle mentioned.

Reaching up, she grabbed the weapons and put them back into their original places. Her eyes stared at the knife Gargle had given her as a present the previous evening, still jammed into the tree. It was worth more than her life.

She left it there. Without turning around once, she went back to her village, found her way to her house, and located herself a quiet corner to sit in. She very desperately needed to think.

End
file.